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Final Assignment EDUC70032 Blended Learning in a Digital Age

Blended learning for Schools in Ecuador: Promoting Active Learning

PART I: Introduction

1. Context and problem exploration

Since 2007 the Ecuadorian government has initiated a process of investment and renovation in the education system, which has included the unification of the curriculum and the construction of new schools 'Escuelas del milenio' (millennium schools). These are a technology-based infrastructure model of schools, which have brought great improvements and educational advances within Ecuador. However, these schools still have the same traditional teaching model and direct learning process of purely face to face lessons, even though the classroom and schools facilities are very well equipped with technological tools and devices. Teachers have not developed their technological, pedagogical and content knowledge (TPACK) (Mishra & Koehler, 2006); this would allow them to effectively integrate technology within their practices. They currently just view learners as empty boxes that need to be filled with knowledge in order to pass the final examinations, which create frustration and demotivation of learners during the lessons, as well as a lack of learner interaction with the content of the lessons between inside and outside the classroom. As a consequence, this creates a negative impact upon the students' learning performances (see Appendix 1). Therefore, there is an urgent requirement to change this teacher-centred learning model for more active and supportive learning, where the learners can critically construct their own meaning of information by social interaction in the classroom, as well as online (Bates, 2015).

2. Overview of the blend

There are various definitions of blended learning, but the most common principle of blended learning is based on the adequate integration of technology both in and outside classroom that promotes self-learning and collaborative work. According to Graham (2006), "Blended learning systems combine face-to-face instruction with computer-mediated instruction (p.5). The author highlights the growing use of new technologies in teaching practices and the need to create adequate blended learning experiences. Hence, for the context previously presented, there is the need to introduce and reinforce: collaborative work, teacher guidance, content interaction and online learning support, in order to create an adequate model of blended learning (see Appendix 2). Therefore, it has been decided to identify this blend as "Juntos aprendemos mejor", which is a Spanish phrase that translates as "Together we learn better", which aims to transform the pedagogy in Ecuadorian schools and bring teachers and learners together in physical and online collaborative learning environments.

3. Learning methodology and technological tools

It has been expressed that the desired outcome of the proposed model of blended learning is to connect teachers, content, students and e-learning to create active learning environments. As a result, the learning theory that fits best with this blend is social constructivism, where learners construct knowledge through social interaction and by the engagement with the most knowledgeable others (MKos); in the current case this could be the teachers and peers. Additionally, the role of the teachers is to structure the information in order to support the comprehension and development of knowledge (Bates, 2015). The aim of the blend is to provide the learners with collaborative work in the classroom that would allow them to interact with the teacher and other students, which would help to release the demotivation of the students during the lessons (see Appendix 3). Additionally, the need to create an online learning environment with the help of WordPress has been identified, in order to support the learners outside the classroom and adequately prepare them for the national examinations (see Appendix 4).

Part II: Literature Review

4. Reasons to employ a blended learning approach

It has been possible to identify that in the Ecuadorian context schools possess a good technological infrastructure that could allow students to improve their learning experience both in and outside the classroom. Additionally, the way that the learners acquire knowledge is being influenced by technology. Presky (2001) identified that “our students have changed radically; today’s students are no longer the people our educational system was designed to teach” (p.1) Hence, there is an imperative need for teachers and educators to adopt and implement a blended learning model of education. Bricault (2015) explored some of the major reasons to shift to a blended culture, and the author mentioned the gain of “pedagogical richness” “access to knowledge” “social interaction” and “the empowerment of the learners”. Likewise, Graham (2006) identified the improvement of pedagogy by the promotion of active learning, alongside the increase of access and flexibility in education, by building a bridge between face to face lessons and online environments and the improvement of cost-effectiveness, by allowing institutions to reach more learners simultaneously.

The proposed blended model has been mainly designed around the enhancement of social interaction and the promotion of active and flexible learning. According to Collis & Moonen (2002), "flexible learning is a complex phenomenon even when expressed in terms of only four key components: technology, pedagogy, implementation and institution". (p.217) The authors emphasised the idea of providing the learners with a choice within the learning experience; this could be in a form of flexibility in location, in programme, types of interaction, forms of communication and study materials. It seems that flexible learning brings various opportunities for learners and educators. However, Stelma, (2017) highlights the problems in relation to "flexibility" within education, and he introduces the concept of "responsiveness", where the idea is to have a model of education that is responsible to the system, the learners and the learning environment. Thus, it has been acknowledged that the proposed blend might struggle to be fully "flexible in program", as the policies, in terms of curriculum, are inflexible. Nevertheless, the proposed blended model responds to the needs of improving the communication and interaction between teachers and students, and facilitates the provision of e-learning materials.

In terms of the technology that would support the development of the proposed blend, it has been suggested that the use of an e-teaching portfolio could be created on WordPress or in any other suitable host. Mason et al. (2004, p.716) identified three types of e-portfolio in terms of purposes: developmental, presentation, and assessment, where the educational context plays an important role, and thus, it is the teacher's decision to take the right direction on the design of the e-portfolio that they wish to create. However, the ideal e-portfolio would be an integration of pedagogy, learning objectives, student feedback and assessment strategies (Roder & Brown, 2009). Moreover, Barrett (2004) highlighted the potential that "web log or blogs" have for hosting e-portfolio, as they can provide more engaging content for students by enhancing collaborative work and promoting reflective teaching practices. Nevertheless, in order to achieve the development of an efficient e-portfolio within the presented context, it is necessary to initially allow time for teachers to develop the necessary skills and knowledge (Stacey & Gerbic, 2008). Wenger et al. (2009) presented the concept of "communities of practice" as a form of professional development, where all the members enrich the information landscape of each other by daily interaction and mutual collaboration.

5. Transition to a blended learning culture

5.1 Preparing teachers for blended instruction

The proposed blended learning model has the objective to transform the pedagogy of teachers from traditional teaching to active learning. However, it has been possible to identify that in this context teachers tend to resist change, whilst there is also a strong belief in the culture where teachers are perceived to be the unique possessors of knowledge and information. Therefore, in order to initiate a transition to the proposed blended learning model, it is necessary to train the teachers correctly and effectively. According to Tucker et al. (2016), "teachers are not objects of change; they are agents of change" (p.33). The authors recognised that when teachers change and adapt their practices to blended instruction, they need to develop and integrate a new set of skills, strategies and technology tools, while also they need to be willing to change their roles from owners of the information to information facilitators.

Additionally, it has been acknowledged that within this context there is a resistance to change by teachers, but not by the educational institutions. Moskal et al. (2013) mentioned that in order to have successful blended learning it is crucial for an institution to have clear goals and stipulate the objective outcomes for all the members that are part of the learning process: institution, students, government and teachers. Similarly, Tucker et al. (2016) indicated the need to provide teachers with a transition to blended learning that is scalable and affordable for an institution. Moreover, Thorne (2003) suggested the creation of a "coaching environment", where the key is the creation of a sense of shared wisdom, which provides value to the experience and knowledge that experienced workers can provide. Likewise, Tucker et al. (2016, p.35) proposed a professional development model based on the term, "as the student, so the teacher", which allows the teachers to place themselves in the position of the learners they have been asked to help develop. The authors have created a framework for this idea based on: "collaboration; hands-on learning; ongoing experiences; mind-set shifts; and personalization (CHOMP)" (p.35). Thus, the current paper will concentrate on the analysis of the collaboration element in professional development with an exploration of the ideas proposed by Wenger et al. (2009) that suggests people learn in practice and by mutual support.

5.2 Supporting transition through communities of practice

Communities of practice (CoP) refer to the concept of how people learn through interaction in their work places or situations of daily life. Wenger et al. (2009) established the CoP as a perspective to understand digital habitats, as it was stated that "it helps us focus on how communities use technology, how they are influenced by it, how technology presents new learning opportunities for communities, how communities influence the use of technologies" (p.11). Hence, a starting point is to evaluate the strength of the relationship between the members of the communities of teachers within this context, in order to establish a mechanism that would allow "knowledge sharing" in relation to the use of technology in teaching practices (Couros, 2015). According to Tucker et al. (2016), "if you ask most teachers how they prefer to learn, their first response is *from other teachers*" (p.36). Consequently, collaboration is a vital element in the transition to blended learning. Nevertheless, Laurillard (2008) established that in reality "many teachers and lecturers have embraced technology to assist their own pedagogic ambitions for their students, but most have not; the powerful drivers of their behaviour as professionals do not drive them towards use of technology" (p.13).

Therefore, in the presented context it is important to develop a sense of self-achievement in the teachers, where they can appreciate what technology can do for them, rather than have technology dictate their practices. Tucker et al. (2016, p.38) suggested that in order to introduce teachers to blended learning environments they need to promote "hands on learning", where educators are allowed time to discover and interact with new technology tools in a community of practice or independent practice; the main idea of this is to allow teachers to appreciate the learning benefits that learners can gain. However, it is important to understand that education systems have factors that may prove detrimental to the innovation in teaching practices, such as: inspections, promotions, assessment methods and results (Laurillard, 2008). Therefore, it is vital to promote shared knowledge in a community of teachers, in order to implement their teaching practices smoothly, although it is also crucial to acknowledge external factors of the education system.

In a recent study by Kofar (2016), it is possible to observe that even tough teachers have positive perceptions and attitudes towards blended learning; the major fears they have is that they perceive blended learning to be an increase in their workload and the incapacity to find appropriate

technological support for this transition by their communities of practice. Wenger et al. (2009, p.24) provided the concept of "technology stewardship" to understand how individuals of a community take responsibility and adopt the best technology tools to suit the needs of their community. Therefore, under this concept it is necessary to identify the "tech stewards", which refers to the people that determine the adequate technology tools to help spread the knowledge and expertise needed to incorporate a blended learning culture, which could be conducted by the use of email, videoconference, chats, social media, etc. Similarly, Tucker et al. (2016, p.38) identified the need to have a "continuous learning culture" from experts and more experienced teachers of blended learning. Overall, it appears that the proposed blended learning has a good potential to be integrated within the Ecuadorian schools' pedagogy, as currently there are strong communities of practices that build and share knowledge with the help of all member. However, in certain cases these communities could also represent a drawback in educational innovation, as they are rooted in traditional teaching practices.

5.3 Helping teachers to plan for a blended learning environment

After teachers have been introduced to the benefits of blended learning with the support of their communities of practice, it is necessary to think about the subsequent stage, where teachers will have to choose the right tools and elements to form their own blended learning environments for their students. According to Oliver and Stallings (2014), teachers that wish to implement blended learning in their practice should consider "contextual considerations, such as topic and subject suitability for blending, learner challenges and available scaffolds, and models of blending that may or may not work across different instructional settings" (p.82). The authors highlighted the need for teachers to fully understand the potential benefits and limitation of the content in their areas of teaching. Likewise, Mishra and Koehler (2006) proposed a teaching framework where "content knowledge (CK) is knowledge about the actual subject matter that is to be learned or taught; the content to be covered in high school social studies or algebra is very different from the content to be covered in a graduate course on computer science or art history" (p.1026).

Therefore, in order to implement blended learning it is important for teachers to understand which elements of the content they want to teach, and whether it is most beneficial face to face lessons or online learning resources, or a combination of both (Hofmann, 2006). Additionally, teachers would

have to understand the differences that learners have and to understand the tools or pedagogy that they would use in order to support them. Oliver and Stallings (2014, p.84) suggested that teachers should provide adequate orientation towards the use of technology tools in the learning environments, in order to gradually meet the needs of all the learners; this is due to the fact that most of blended learning environments tend to include new educational technologies that most of the students are unfamiliar with. Therefore, for the proposed blended learning to be implemented it will be necessary to group teachers according to their areas of expertise, such as science, humanities, arts, etc., in order to place them in a community of practice where they would share information and work on solutions for similar challenges found in their areas.

6. Conclusions

In conclusion, it is undeniable that blended learning possesses various advantages for the learning process, it can provide unique and personalised learning experiences. Nevertheless, it requires the development of the adequate skills and knowledge for teachers to incorporate and maintain the correct balance between face to face lessons and online learning environments. The proposed blended learning for this context “Juntos aprendemos mejor” “Together we learn better” has the potential to be implemented in the schools, due to the fact that the Ecuadorian government has the growing desire to improve education at all levels; there have already been major changes in school infrastructure, curriculum and assessment. Thus, there is a possibility that the next step would be a modification of the pedagogy. However, as it has been presented in this paper, an adequate shift to a blended model of education will first require a strongly designed professional development program, which will have to be supported by a rewarding schema. Furthermore, it will be necessary to prepare the students for the transition to gradually gain the adequate skills to be able to work independently and in collaborative learning environments.

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Appendix 1

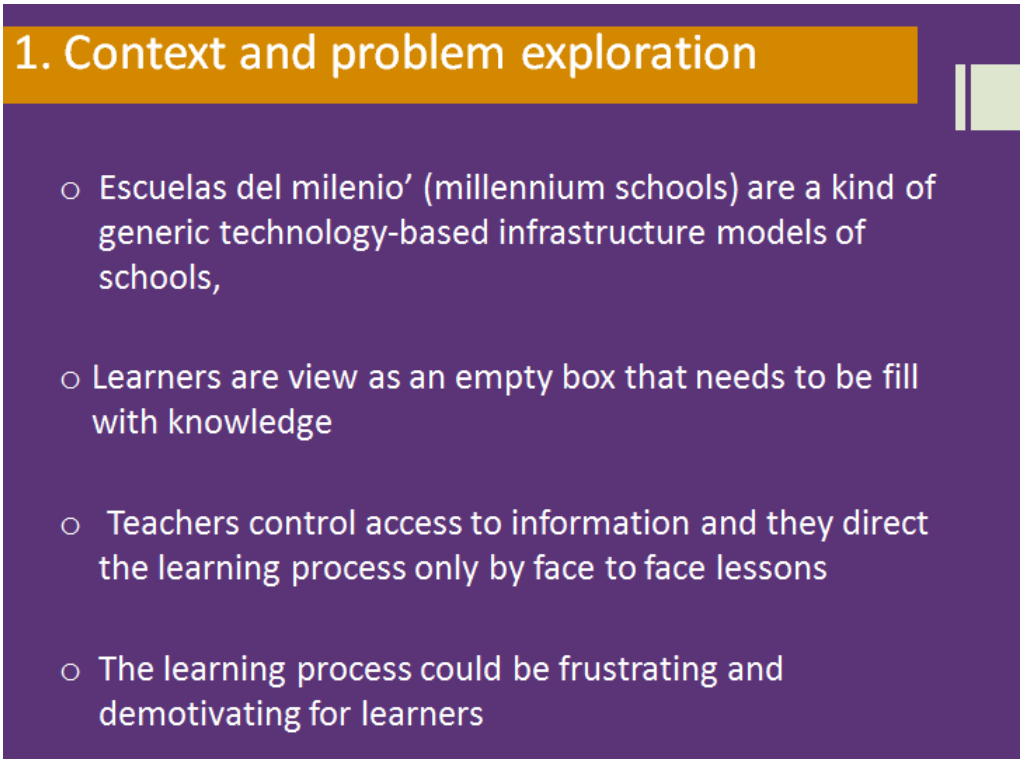


Image 1 Context and problem exploration

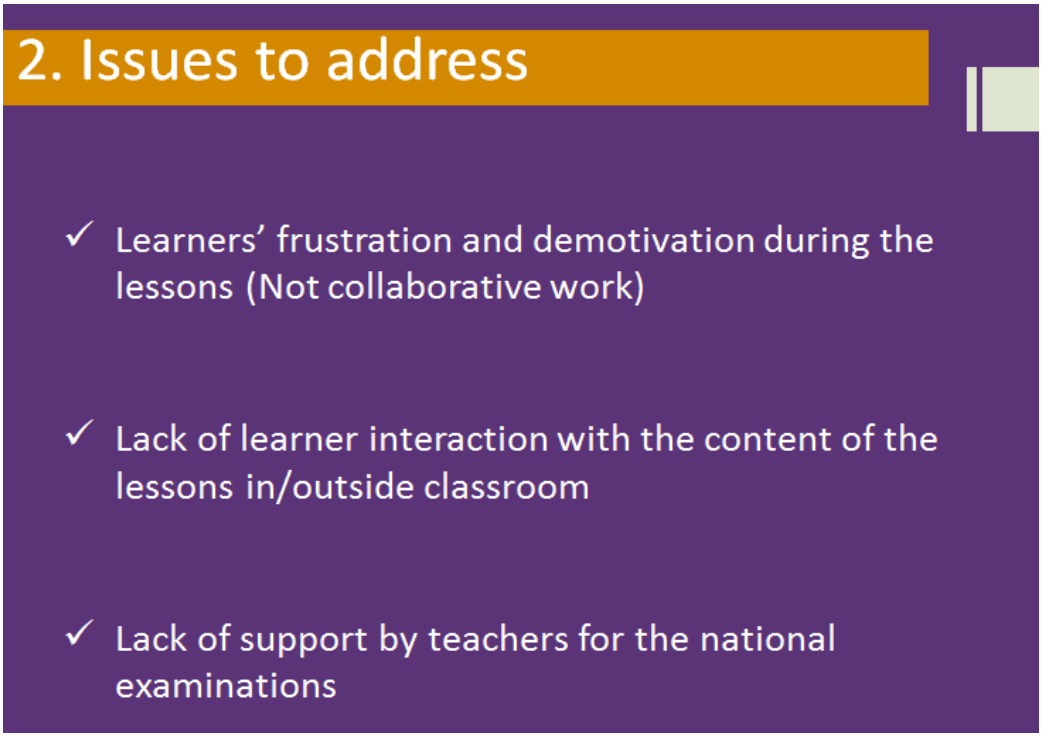


Image 2 Issues

Appendix 2

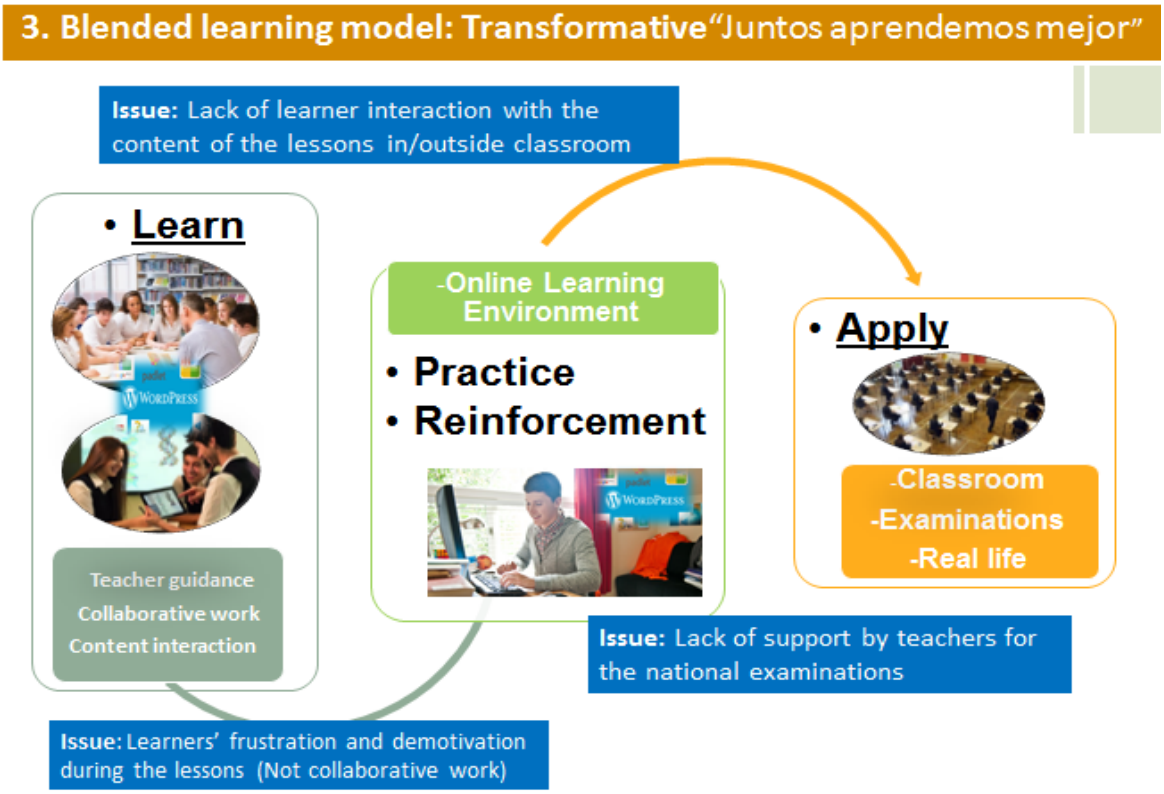


Image 1 1 BLENDED LEARNING MODEL

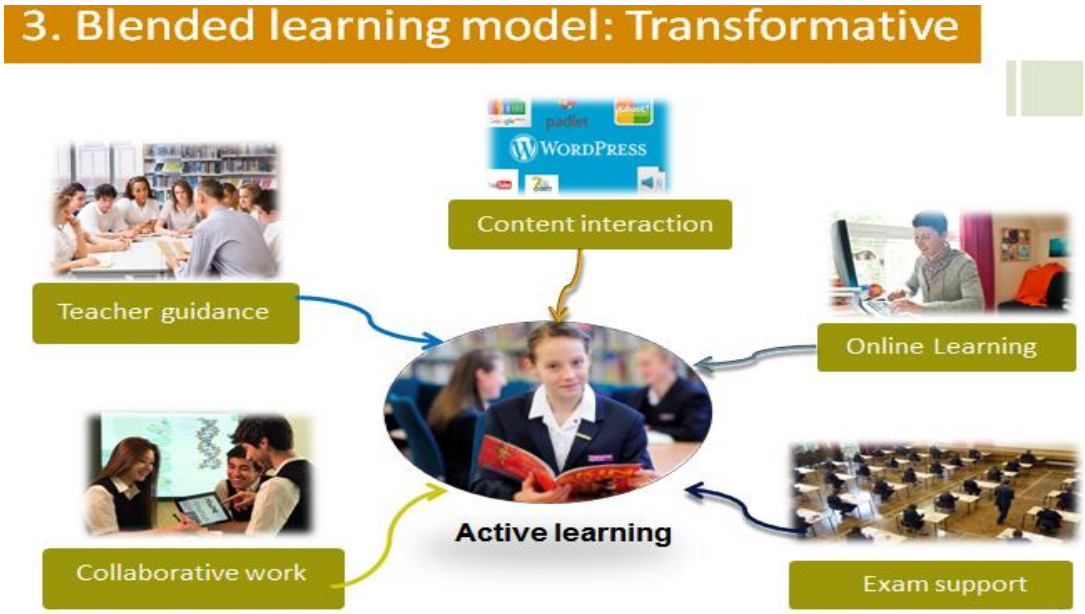


Image 1 2 BLENDED LEARNING MODE

Appendix 3

Image 1 3 Learning Theory

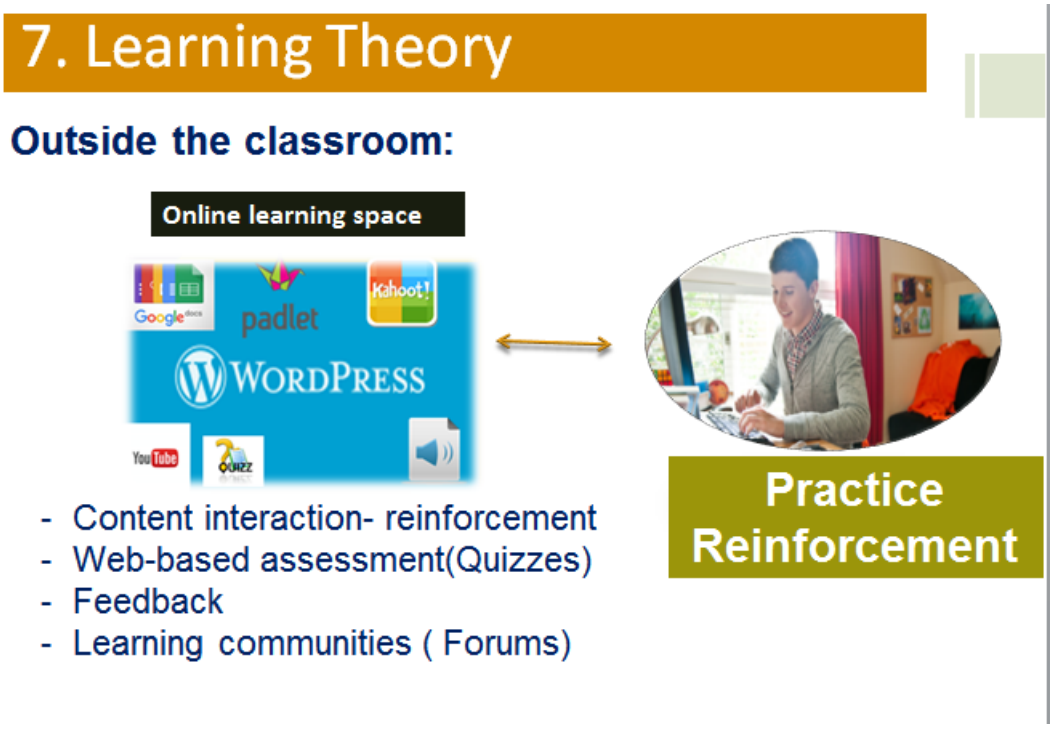
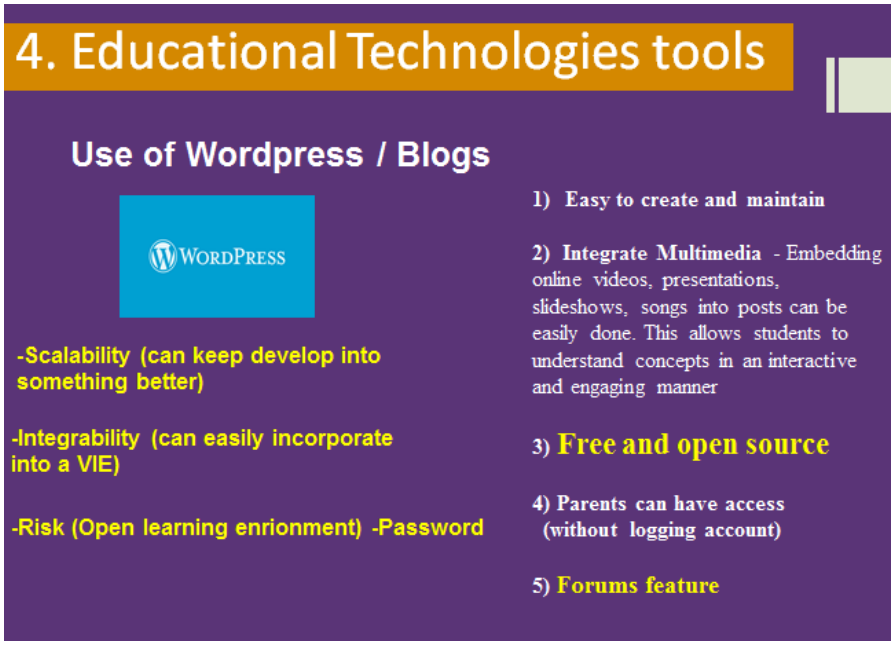


Image 1 4 Learning Theory

Appendix 4


4. Educational Technologies tools
Use of Wordpress / Blogs
WordPress
-Scalability (can keep develop into something better)
-Integrability (can easily incorporate into a VIE)
-Risk (Open learning enrionment) -Password
1) Easy to create and maintain
2) Integrate Multimedia - Embedding online videos, presentations, slideshows, songs into posts can be easily done. This allows students to understand concepts in an interactive and engaging manner
3) Free and open source
4) Parents can have access (without logging account)
5) Forums feature

5. Example: Language Teaching
Audio
PROTECTED: SPEAKING CONTROLLED ASSESSMENT
Jacqueline Espinoza
JUEGOS PARA IMPRIMIR/ PRINTABLE GAMES
Quizzes
(Student's progress)
Games